

DUCKS UNLIMITED TESTIMONY
Before a Joint House Committee Meeting
Great Lakes and Environment, Rep. Rebekah Warren, Chair
Environmental Quality, Rep. Doug Bennett, Chair
March 17, 2009

RE: Future State of the Wetlands Protection Program in Michigan

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the 35,000 Ducks Unlimited members in Michigan. Ducks Unlimited is a private conservation organization whose mission is to conserve waterfowl (ducks, geese, and swans) in North America by conserving waterfowl habitat- virtually all types of wetlands and associated uplands. We have a regional office located in Ann Arbor that serves 18 states, including Michigan. Working with our conservation partners, Ducks Unlimited has invested more than \$22 million in Michigan to protect, restore and improve wetlands and their associated uplands. We have conserved 60,461 acres of habitat in 1,411 different projects on private, state and federal lands across the state. Appropriate wetland protection in Michigan is fundamental to our mission and to protecting the substantial conservation investment we have made in this state, as well as for the benefit of our membership, Michigan citizens in general, and the economic recovery of our state.

Michigan is experiencing very challenging economic times and we support exploring new and cost effective options for delivering the essential services of state government. Conservation of the state's natural resources, including wetlands, is one of those essential services. Ducks Unlimited is open to considering any option for how to move forward effectively with a wetlands protection program in Michigan. However, changes absolutely must not result in any net loss of the protections currently in place for wetlands and the critical services they provide. In our estimation, House Bills 4153 and 4552 and Senate Bill 187 do not meet this standard. Healthy wetlands are a critical component of an intact and functioning ecosystem, which in turn is necessary for the health and economic vitality of this region and its people.

Wetlands provide essential ecosystem services to society including water quality improvement as sediments and nutrients are filtered out of run-off water, reducing peak stream flows during storm events and maintaining base flows during droughts, habitat for fish and wildlife, recreation opportunities for ourselves and for tourists, and moderating impacts associated with a changing climate. These ecosystem services are provided by wetlands free of charge, simply by their mere existence on the landscape. If we lose wetlands, we lose those services they provide for free and society has to pick up the cost. This comes in the form of increased water treatment costs, increased dredging in our rivers and harbors, flood damage, loss of ecotourism income, need for fish hatcheries, and more. A study published in the journal "Nature" placed a value on the ecosystem services provided by wetlands at \$10,573 per acre per year (Costanza et al. 1997). In terms of just recreational benefits associated with wetlands, the value of Saginaw Bay coastal wetlands is estimated at \$15.9 million per year (Southwick Associates 2006). Waterfowl hunting, which depends on healthy and intact wetland ecosystems, generates \$1 billion of economic activity in Michigan each year (USFWS 2006). Michigan's wetland protection program plays a valuable role in sustaining our economy by protecting the ecosystem services provided by wetlands and avoiding the societal costs to replace those services lost when wetlands are degraded or destroyed.

Of the estimated 11.2 million acres of pre-settlement wetlands in Michigan, half had been lost by the time Michigan enacted its wetland protections laws in 1979. Since then, in the southern two-thirds of Michigan's lower peninsula, on average 5% of all remaining natural wetlands have been lost. In some counties this loss has been as high as 17%. The net loss of wetlands for this area was 30,000 acres, and that is with wetland protection and mitigation programs in place. This has led to the estimated loss of more than 18,000 pairs of breeding mallards.

We are very concerned that proposals to return the wetland protection program to the federal government or shift the responsibility to local government will reduce wetland protection in Michigan. We do not see how we can repeal Michigan's wetland protection statute, forego our delegation of authority for implementing Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and still maintain the same level of protection that we have in place currently. Until this can be demonstrated, we strongly oppose repealing the Michigan Wetland Protection statute and returning wetland protection in Michigan back to the federal government. The federal wetland protection program is in disarray due to recent Supreme Court decisions that have clouded jurisdiction and confounded the guidelines for wetland protection and permitting at the federal level. Without question, federal protection is not as strong as the protections we currently have in place in Michigan. In addition to jeopardizing hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands that our society needs, the federal process for issuing wetland permits can be unwieldy and is expected to introduce significant delays for those seeking wetland permits. This later issue is important to us because Ducks Unlimited and our partners frequently must secure permits to implement the activities necessary to restore or enhance wetlands in the state.

The time is right for taking a fresh look at how we administer wetlands protection in Michigan and modernizing our approach. New technologies and wetland assessment tools are emerging that have potential to dramatically improve wetland protection and permitting if they are used effectively. These tools could make the process of regulating and mitigating impacts to wetlands much quicker, more cost-effective, and based on sound science. Rather than simply considering whether to cut Michigan's wetland protection program, we should be considering other and better options that will allow us to maintain excellent protection of wetlands, improve customer service, and make the program more affordable for Michigan taxpayers.

Ducks Unlimited offers its assistance in these efforts to maintain and improve wetland protection and restoration policies in Michigan. Accordingly, we also will oppose efforts to weaken or diminish wetland protection. With the completion of Michigan's Great Lakes Restoration Plan, let us move ahead with wisdom, purposeful intention, and partnership to improve Michigan's wetland regulatory system. Everyone associated with wetlands would appreciate a regulatory system that provides better service, increased clarity and more consistency in its approach, recognizing the great economic, recreational and ecosystem services wetlands provide to all Michiganders. Thank you.

References:

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